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## ABSTRACT

A study explored whether public relations practitioners in one-way environments (press agency/publicity and public information) and in two-way environments (asymmetric and symmetric) have different general attitudes toward research and whether they use social science techniques differently. A mail survey of 200 randomly chosen public relations persons (of whom 111 responded for a return rate of 56%) examined the extent to which they understand, use, and conduct research; the extent to which they use applied versus theoretical research; and the type of environment in which they work. Results indicated that practitioners in one-way environments have less favorable attitudes toward research techniques than do those in two-way environments, and that they work in public relations departments which are less likely to use theoretical research to solve immediate problems or in long-term planning. (Three tables of data and 11 notes are included.) (SR)

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Public Relations Division

Practitioners' Use of Research and Theory  
in One-way and Two-way Environments

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Paper presented to the Public Relations Division, Association for  
Education in Journalism and Mass Communication annual  
convention, Washington, D.C., August 10-13, 1989.

Practitioners' Use of Research and Theory  
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This research explores whether practitioners in two different environments described by Grunig and others (one-way vs. two-way) have different general attitudes toward research and whether they use social science techniques differently. Fifty-six percent of 200 corporate practitioners responding to the mail survey indicated the extent to which they understand, use and conduct research; the extent to which they use applied vs. theoretical research; and the type of environment in which they work.

As predicted, practitioners in one-way environments have less favorable attitudes toward research techniques than do those in two-way environments, and they work in public relations departments that are less likely to use theoretical research to solve immediate problems or in long-term planning.

Results have implications for those who wish to construct theories about what "happens" in one-way vs. two-way public relations environments, and they raise interesting questions about why those in one-way environments think and behave as they do.

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By David L. Martinson  
and Michael Ryan

Public relations practitioners are admonished almost daily to use the theories and techniques of the social sciences as they plan, execute and evaluate their campaigns. Indeed, it often is asserted that a practitioner cannot function properly without borrowing from the social sciences.<sup>1</sup> One of the earliest calls for research in public relations was issued by Lang, who wrote in 1951:

[T]he executive who understands and knows how to utilize the tremendous potentialities of social research in his public relations activities will be years ahead of his competitor who relies on hunches and intuition. It is, therefore, the research-minded executive of today who understands the strength and limitations of this vast resource who will become the true public relations executive of tomorrow.<sup>2</sup>

Several researchers have tried to determine the extent to which practitioners do, in fact, use social science techniques. The results are not terribly encouraging.

Grunig, for example, said: "Lately, I have begun to feel more and more like the fundamentalist minister railing against sin; the difference being that I have railed for evaluation. Just as everyone is against sin, so most public relations people I talk to are for evaluation. People keep on sinning, however, and PR people continue not to do evaluation research."<sup>3</sup>

Ryan and Martinson found in a survey of 200 practitioners that more than a third seldom or never use research techniques and more than half use them only occasionally. Only 13.2% said they use social science techniques in all programs. "Unfortunately, it is apparent that practitioners engage in considerably more talk than action when it comes to using social science research techniques," they said. "Few actually use quantitative methods consistently."<sup>4</sup>

What may be true for the field as a whole, however, may not be true for all of the field's parts. Grunig's work suggests that the type of public relations environment in which one works may determine the types of activities in which one engages. One of those activities may be the use of research techniques.<sup>5</sup>

Grunig identified the following four models of public relations:

Press agency/publicity: Practitioners seek to propagandize and to control the environment, to use one-way communication techniques, to conduct little research and to engage in advocacy.

Public information: Practitioners seek to disseminate information and to adapt to the environment, to use one-way communication techniques, to conduct readability or readership studies and to disseminate information.

Two-way asymmetric: Practitioners seek to control and to persuade scientifically, to use two-way communication techniques with imbalanced effects, to conduct formative research to evaluate attitudes and to engage in advocacy.

Two-way symmetric: Practitioners seek to adapt to the environment and to achieve mutual understanding, to use two-way communication techniques with balanced effects, to conduct formative research to evaluate understanding and to mediate with the environment.

Practitioners in one-way environments allegedly seldom use social science techniques, while those in two-way environments do. "[I]n fact," Grunig and Hunt note, "research is the very reason they are called two-way models."<sup>6</sup>

The models suggest that practitioners in one-way (press agency/publicity and public information) environments should view research techniques less positively than those who work in two-way (asymmetric and symmetric) environments. Therefore, the following hypothesis is tested:

H<sub>01</sub>: Respondents who work in two-way environments will agree significantly more

strongly than those in one-way environments that practitioners who cannot use, understand and conduct research do not serve employers as well as those who can, and that practitioners cannot call themselves professionals if they cannot at least understand social science research techniques.

The models also suggest that the type of research conducted varies by public relations environment. When practitioners in one-way environments do use research, it tends to be extremely practical and of limited value, whereas those in two-way environments sometimes conduct research that is more theoretical and of more lasting value. Consequently, the following hypothesis is tested:

H<sub>02</sub>: Practitioners who work in two-way environments will agree significantly more strongly than those in one-way environments that their public relations units use applied and theoretical research to solve immediate, short-term problems and to help in long-term planning.

### Method

This study is part of a larger research project that examines practitioners' views of social science research techniques and professionalism.<sup>7</sup> Data were collected through a mail survey of 200 public relations persons chosen randomly from the directory of the Public Relations Society of America. Only practitioners who worked for corporations having their offices in the United States were surveyed.<sup>8</sup> A total of 111 responded to one of three mailings, a return rate of 56%.

Practitioners were told that "social science research methods" should be defined as quantitative research techniques--probability sampling, statistical analysis, survey research design, experimental design, hypothesis testing, data interpretation--applied to public relations problems. The three levels of knowledge about social science research were defined as follows:

To "understand" or to "have knowledge about" social science methods means a practitioner has (1) an appreciation for social science techniques and (2) a general idea of their importance and application in public relations. The practitioner has no detailed

knowledge about research techniques, and he or she is unable to interpret data without expert help.

To "use" social science methods means a practitioner has some detailed knowledge about social science research techniques, but not enough to conduct a research study without expert help. The practitioner is able to interpret and to use data.

To "conduct" research means a practitioner has substantial knowledge about social science research techniques and is able to conduct research and to interpret research data without help.

Severn and Dunham, in their study of advertising professionals, define "applied" and "theoretical" research rather well; our definitions of the terms are based on their work:<sup>9</sup>

"Applied research" is designed to solve a specific problem (for example, determining the response to a campaign to restore confidence in a product that caused death or injury).

"Theoretical research" leads to a general understanding of the overall process and impact of public relations strategies; such research leads to theory-building and to the development of conceptual models.

The types of environments in which practitioners worked were identified using eight items developed by Grunig and used in several research studies. Grunig and other researchers have used many more items to divide public relations environments into the four categories, or models. Approximately one-third as many items (eight) are used here since we are dividing environments into only two categories (one-way vs. two-way). The items are reported in Table 1 on page 5.

### Results

Hypothesis one suggests that respondents who work in two-way environments will agree more strongly than those who work in one-way environments that practitioners who cannot use, understand or conduct research do not serve employers as well as those who can, and that

Table 1

## Responses to Items Used to Identify One-way, Two-way Environments

Item	S.A.	A.	Neu.	D.	S.D.	Mean
(1) The purpose of public relations in my organization is to publicize the organization, product or service in any way possible (one-way).	13.2	33.0	5.5	22.0	26.4	3.2
(2) No time is available for research in my public relations department because everyone is so busy writing news stories or producing publications (one-way).	11.0	39.6	5.5	27.5	16.5	3.0
(3) Practitioners in my public relations department think public relations is an art that cannot be measured quantitatively (one-way).	7.6	22.8	12.0	43.5	14.1	3.3
(4) The purpose of public relations in my organization is to disseminate information to the public as truthfully and accurately as possible (one-way).	52.7	36.3	7.7	3.3	-	1.6
(5) The purpose of public relations in my organization is to develop mutual understanding between the organization's management and the publics with which the organization interacts (two-way).	44.6	40.2	3.3	9.8	2.2	1.8
(6) Before starting a public relations campaign in my department, practitioners use survey data to make sure they describe the organization, product or service in ways the public is most likely to accept (two-way).	7.7	26.4	19.8	27.5	18.7	3.2
(7) Before starting a public relations campaign in my department, practitioners use research to find out how well the organization's publics and its management understand each other's thinking (two-way).	6.6	38.5	13.2	24.2	17.6	3.1
(8) The purpose of public relations in my organization is to persuade the public to agree with the organization's viewpoint (two-way).	8.8	39.6	14.3	28.6	8.8	2.9



practitioners cannot call themselves professionals if they cannot at least understand social science research techniques.

The hypothesis was tested in two ways. First, an index was created using the eight items in Table 1. Respondents were divided into two groups: those who worked in two-way environments and those who worked in one-way environments. Analysis of variance was used to identify statistically significant differences when each Table 2 item was broken down by one-way vs. two-way group membership.<sup>10</sup> Second, each Table 2 item was broken down by each item that comprised the index (i.e., each Table 1 item).

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Table 2  
General Attitudes toward Research by Type of Environment

Item	Mean Scores*			
	Two-way	One-way	F	p
(1) Practitioners who cannot <u>use</u> social science research techniques do not serve clients and employers as well as those who can.	2.6	3.4	4.6	.03
(2) Practitioners who cannot <u>understand</u> social science research techniques do not serve clients and employers as well as those who can.	2.1	2.8	3.3	.07
(3) Practitioners who cannot <u>conduct</u> social science studies do not serve clients and employers as well as those who can.	5.1	5.4	.5	.50
(4) Practitioners cannot call themselves professionals if they do not at least <u>understand</u> social science research techniques.	2.6	3.4	4.3	.04

\*A seven-point scale was used in this research, with a "1" meaning "strongly agree" and a "7" meaning "strongly disagree."

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Hypothesis One had some support when the index was used, as shown in Table Two. Practitioners who worked in two-way environments agreed significantly more strongly than those in one-way environments with Item 1 (practitioners who cannot use social science techniques do not serve clients as well), and with Item 4 (practitioners cannot call themselves professionals if they do not understand social science techniques). In addition, responses to Item 2 (practitioners who cannot understand research do not serve clients as well) were in the predicted directions, although the mean difference was not statistically significant. Responses to Item 3 (practitioners who cannot conduct studies do not serve clients as well) also were in the predicted directions, but responses of both groups were on the disagree side of the scale.

Hypothesis One also had some support when each Table 2 item was broken down by each Table 1 item. A significant difference was found when Item 2, Table 2 (practitioners who cannot understand social science techniques do not serve clients as well) was broken down by Item 1, Table 1 (the purpose of public relations is to publicize the organization, product or service in any way possible). Those who agreed with Item 2, Table 2, disagreed significantly more strongly with Item 1, Table 1, as predicted ( $p = .01$ ).

A statistically significant difference also was found when Item 2, Table 2, was broken down by Item 7, Table 1 (before starting a campaign, practitioners use research to find out how well publics and management understand each other). Those who agreed with Item 2 agreed significantly more strongly with Item 7 ( $p = .01$ ). Those who agreed with Item 1 (practitioners who cannot use social science techniques do not serve clients as well) agreed significantly more strongly with Item 7 ( $p = .02$ ), as predicted.

No other mean differences were statistically significant, although results for all other items were in the predicted directions.

Hypothesis Two predicted that practitioners who work in two-way environments will agree significantly more than those in one-way environments that their public relations units use applied and theoretical research to solve short-term problems and to help in long-term planning.

The hypothesis was tested in the same way Hypothesis One was tested: Table 3 items were broken down by the index created by the combination of items in Table 1, and each Table 3 item was broken down by each Table 1 item. The hypothesis was supported when items were broken down by one-way vs. two-way group membership, as shown in Table 3, and when Table 3 items were broken down by Table 1 items.

Results show that persons who worked in two-way and one-way environments disagreed most strongly about the use of theoretical research. Practitioners who worked in two-way environments agreed significantly more strongly with Item 2 (my department uses theoretical research to help solve immediate problems), and with Item 4 (my department uses theoretical

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Table 3  
Attitudes toward Applied, Theoretical Research by Type of Environment

Item	Mean Scores*			
	Two-way	One-way	F	p
(1) My public relations department uses <u>applied</u> research to help solve immediate, short-term problems.	2.6	2.9	3.0	.09
(2) My public relations department uses <u>theoretical</u> research to help solve immediate, short-term problems.	2.7	3.2	9.1	.00
(3) My public relations department uses <u>applied</u> research to help in long-term planning.	2.4	2.7	2.2	.14
(4) My public relations department uses <u>theoretical</u> research to help in long-term planning.	2.3	3.3	22.8	.00

\*A four-point scale was used in this part of the research: A "1" meant a unit always uses some research, while a "4" meant a unit never uses research.

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research to help in long-term planning). The other mean differences were not statistically significant, as shown in Table 3, but differences were in the predicted directions.

Analysis of variance was used to break down each item in Table 3 by each item in Table

1. Statistically significant mean differences (in the hypothesized directions) were found when:

Item 3 (practitioners think public relations is an art that cannot be measured quantitatively) was broken down by Item 2 (practitioners use theoretical research to help solve immediate problems),  $p = .00$ , and by Item 4 (practitioners use theoretical research to help in long-term planning),  $p = .00$ .

Item 6 (before starting a campaign, practitioners use survey data to make sure they describe the organization, product or service in ways the public is most likely to accept) was broken down by Item 1 (practitioners use applied research to help solve immediate problems),  $p = .02$ ; by Item 2 ( $p = .01$ ); by Item 3 (practitioners use applied research to help in long-term planning),  $p = .04$ ; and by Item 4 ( $p = .00$ ).

Item 7 (before starting a campaign, practitioners use research to find out how well publics and management understand each other) was broken down by Item 1 ( $p = .01$ ); by Item 3 ( $p = .03$ ); and by Item 4 ( $p = .01$ ).

And when Item 8 (the purpose of public relations is to persuade the public to agree with the organization's viewpoint) was broken down by Item 2 ( $p = .05$ ).

All other differences were in the hypothesized directions, but they were not statistically significant.

### Conclusions

Several scholars suggest that use of social science research techniques is a function of the types of environments in which practitioners work, and that research in some environments is used for different purposes than in others. Specifically, Grunig and Hunt assert that

practitioners who work in two-way environments use social science research techniques more than those who work in one-way environments.<sup>11</sup>

We tried to determine empirically whether general attitudes toward research of practitioners in one-way environments are different from those in two-way environments, and whether their public relations units use applied and theoretical research differently. Practitioners in the two different environmental types do have differing general attitudes and their units use theoretical research (but not applied research) differently.

Practitioners in two-way environments agree significantly more than those in one-way environments that practitioners who cannot use social science techniques do not serve clients and employers as well as those who can, and that practitioners cannot call themselves professionals if they do not at least understand social science research techniques. The mean differences are statistically significant. Practitioners in two-way environments agree more strongly (but not significantly so) that practitioners who do not understand social science techniques do not serve their clients as well.

Although it is predictable, it is not entirely clear why those in one-way environments have more negative attitudes toward social science research techniques.

One answer may be that many practitioners simply have not yet accepted the value of research techniques in daily practice, even though scholars, educators and practitioners have extolled their virtues for more than four decades. If so, that may mean those practitioners do not recognize the importance of two-way communication, an intriguing topic for future research.

Another answer may be that practitioners in one-way environments do not recognize the importance of social science techniques because they think they do not really work, because they are too expensive or because they don't wish to take the time to learn them.

Still a third possibility is that practitioners in one-way environments think they can engage in two-way communication without using social science techniques: They may think it is enough to talk to the local police reporter to find out what media personnel are thinking, or to

talk to a high school algebra teacher to find out what educators are thinking. Such practitioners must learn, however, that they must use more sophisticated techniques if they are to engage in effective two-way communication.

Practitioners in two-way environments are far more likely to see their units conduct theoretical research than are those in one-way environments. Indeed, one might well conclude that theoretical research simply is not done in one-way environments, while some theoretical research (by no means a great deal, however) is done in two-way environments. Furthermore, applied research is more likely to be conducted in two-way environments, as one might expect given the findings reported earlier, although the apparent differences between the two environmental types is not as vast for applied research as it is for theoretical research.

The greater reliance on theoretical research by those who work in two-way environments is not difficult to understand. They apparently are in closer contact with research studies and research results, and it is not difficult to imagine how such practitioners might quickly learn the importance of developing a context to explain research findings. That leads directly to the next step: using theoretical research and building theory.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Please see Stephen E. Fitzgerald, "Public Relations Learns to Use Research," Public Opinion Quarterly, 21:141-146 (Spring 1957); Peter Finn, "Demystifying Public Relations," Public Relations Journal, 38:12-17 (May 1982); Glen M. Broom and David M. Dozier, "An Overview: Evaluation Research in Public Relations," Public Relations Quarterly, 28:5-8 (Fall 1983); and David M. Dozier, "Planning and Evaluation in PR Practice," Public Relations Review, 11:17-25 (Summer 1985).

<sup>2</sup>Frank Lang, "The Role of Research in Public Relations," Public Opinion Quarterly, 15:54-64 (Spring 1951), p. 64.

<sup>3</sup>James E. Grunig, "Basic Research Provides Knowledge that Makes Evaluation Possible," Public Relations Quarterly, 28:28-32 (Fall 1983), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup>Michael Ryan and David L. Martinson, "Social Science Research, Professionalism and Public Relations Practitioners," in preparation, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>James E. Grunig, "Organizations and Public Relations: Testing a Communication Theory," Journalism Monographs, No. 46 (November 1976).

<sup>6</sup>James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, Managing Public Relations (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winson, 1984), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup>Ryan and Martinson, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup>We surveyed only U.S. corporations to avoid mailing difficulties, cultural differences that can make opinion sampling problematic and language difficulties.

<sup>9</sup>Jessica J.H. Severn and Rodney A. Dunham, "Advertising Practitioners' Uses and Perceptions of Research," paper presented to the Advertising Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication annual convention, Norman, OK., August 1986, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup>The test is described in SPSS-X User's Guide, 3rd ed. (Chicago: SPSS Inc., 1988), pp. 642-654.

<sup>11</sup>Grunig and Hunt, op. cit.